

Chapter One

It Was a Day Full of Clouds

Descending by parachute through cloud, Lt. John Pease was denied that especial outlook people can make when dropping earthward; when what looks like Monopoly hotels and houses, cars, flattened landscapes with pencil forests, grains of colored sand, become real objects. Everything small and toy-like on the ground becomes big and adult-like all at once. Such is the scale of view from the air.

Falling through space Pease could not see the ground and he could not see the sky. All was cloud. But he could feel the breeze of his fall against his cheek. He had pulled the rip cord of his parachute and as it opened his rapid descent abruptly terminated. He was aware of swinging like a pendulum.

It takes a certain kind of something to jump out of a plummeting airplane into a world you cannot see. Into such an unknown, with no direction home. Survival perhaps. Nobody thinks of survival when faced with survival. It's something you do.

Pease knew the ground was coming because the cloud was thinning into fog. He saw a tree and next thing he was sliding down a hillside being pulled by his parachute through prickly and scrubby vegetation and over and through sharp rocks. He finally came to rest and realized he was alive. Of course, he hadn't a glimmer of an idea where he was. It was a toss up. Somehow that didn't matter; he was alive.

Pease briefly wondered about the other 18 pilots who had left with him that morning. October 24, 1941. March Army Air Field. Riverside, California. But he had other pressing matters. Like, cold. Like, being soaked by snow mixed with rain. Like, where to find food, water, and shelter. And like, how the hell does he get out of here? Wherever "here" is.

John Pease found a meandering river choked with trees, grasses, and sedges and began his own rescue by walking downstream.

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The motor on the P-40 Tomahawk piloted by Lt. Jack West sputtered, backfired once, and died. Within seconds the rest of the planes in his formation disappeared in the clouds.

West was alone.

While trying to restart the P-40's Allison engine Lt. West lost situational awareness and found himself in a tight spiral,

heading down. He recovered, quickly found himself in another descending spiral, and broke through the smothering clouds. All he could see above and around him were jagged snow-choked mountain peaks and rocks. Lots of rocks.

It didn't take a college education to know his moment of truth was at hand.

West cranked the cockpit canopy back only to have the slipstream from heading 300 miles per hour through mother earth's atmosphere half-close the canopy upon him. Standing on the instrument panel, West pushed himself out into the slipstream, rolled himself into a human ball and was swept away from his airplane. He pulled his ripcord. The chute popped open, made one swing, and snagged a tree.

Close call.

Jack West's landing on the ground coincided with a terrific explosion from 200 feet away as his Tomahawk collided with the ground, exploding in a fireball.

West realized how cold he felt with his street shoes, summer uniform, and no hat, jacket, or sweater. And the fire from his crashed P-40 looked oh so warm. "Come in," it said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm."

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Lt. Leonard Lydon heard his motor quit. No gas? No! Checking the gauge he could see plenty of fuel. At least 30 gallons.

Lydon got the motor restarted but found himself in a stall and then a spin. Through the fog he could make out the faint outline of sharp crags and mountain peaks. Recovering from his spin, the lieutenant had enough forward momentum, even without his motor running, to get his P-40 in a normal, but slow, 100 mile per hour glide. He cranked back his canopy, began to climb out onto the left side of his ship, and felt the slipstream pluck him out of the cockpit and then he was falling.

Lydon pulled his ripcord and was jerked into an upright position and then felt himself falling through fog and light snow. Breaking clear of the cloud he drifted over the summit of some sharp spires of mountain and thudded harshly onto a steep, rocky slope.

What the..? Where the..?

No time for thinking. Lydon was sliding down a slippery slope of

loose rock and sharp vegetation. He had to arrest his fall or be chewed up.

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Two other pilots that cold and cloudy day were not as lucky as Pease, West, and Lydon.

Also suffering engine mishaps and irregularities, Lt. Richard Long fell behind the squadron in the clouds and became separated from the rest of his group. Not knowing it, because he couldn't see it, Long was flying over the high peaks of Kings Canyon National Park in the same vicinity as West and Lydon.

Then, it happened again. Long's engine sputtered and died.

Richard Long had already complained to a comrade how sick and tired he was of his engine always cutting out. Piece of... Now this! Too high. Too cold. No supplemental oxygen. In a cloud. No way of knowing where he was. Should he bail out? Or perchance unsure of bailing out into the amniotic fluid of cloud and fog with no sign of the earth below and above him only sky. Long struggled to restart his Tomahawk's engine.

He was not successful and, instead, slammed into the side of a mountain at over 12,000 feet. There was no one around to see the fireball his P-40 made. Many years later, engineers with the Boeing Corporation would come up with a term for what happened to Lt. Richard Long: CFIT - Controlled Flight Into Terrain.

The day he died was supposed to be Richard Long's wedding day.

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Lt. William Birrell was also now separated from the squadron because of clouds and confusion: Lost. Like the others, Birrell was commanded by his superior officer and therefore condemned to mush his way through this muck, flying blind in zero visibility. What to do? Find yourself was the simple answer. Get your bearings. He decided to make wide circles at a hoped for safe altitude of 5800 feet. He hoped to discover a hole in the soup that would help him find the ground.

Birrell had no idea where he was but he must have figured he was nowhere near high mountains because of what happened next. He figured on being west of the High Sierra. Over California's Central Valley.

But, no. In the Sierra Nevada foothills, east of Fresno, the high whine of an airplane engine was heard by a woodcutter. He saw a

brilliant flash of light to his east. It accounted for an enormous glow in the fog. Later that afternoon searchers reached the source of that brilliant flash; Lt. Birrell's P-40 Tomahawk had crashed, exploded, and burned. Judging from the condition of the wreckage and the Tomahawk's propeller, the lieutenant had been flying at a high rate of speed and in control of his aircraft. CFIT.

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This all happened October 24, 1941. And if the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor hadn't happened 44 days later, the commanding officer of Pease, West, Lydon, Long, Birrell, and many others who soon would suffer, should have met a different fate. As it was...